BOOKS

Off The Shelf

From *Cuckoo's Nest* To Kids' Books

a conversation with Ken Kesey

by Danny McCue

TALK TO KEN KESEY for awhile about writing, and you almost forget he's been a literary outsider for more than a quarter century.

Perhaps as well-known for being the central character in Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, which chronicled his exploits as the leader of a band of proto-hippies known as the Merry Pranksters, as he is for being the author of *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* and *Sometimes A Great Notion*, Kesey has spent the better part of the past three decades engaged in "living" his books rather than committing them to paper.

When there have been blips, signs of the lettered life from his farm in the wet hills of Oregon's Willamette Valley, they've often come in the form of surprises: *Caverns*, a mystery written in collaboration with the graduate class he taught at the University of Oregon a few years ago; *A Further Inquiry*, a rejected-screenplay-turned-into-a-book in which he puts the Merry Pranksters on trial; and two children's books: *Little Tricker The Squirrel Meets Big Double The Bear* and *The Sea Lion*, both of which he now frequently "performs" for young audiences around the country.

There's a price to all this, of course. When he recently once again tackled the novel, likening the process, as William Faulkner did, to the "dog having to go against the bear, just to keep calling itself a dog," critics reviewed his persona as much as they did his work. Many of them, still smarting from his rejection of the New York-based publishing world, were less than kind.

"You know, I wouldn't have let Tom Wolfe do that (book) if I had known what I know now," he says, both of the phenomena and how it has effected him. "(In *Kool-Aid Test*) it's like he's looking at me from an east coast crow's nest. What he's really looking at is this huge wart beside my nose, and he writes about this wart so eloquently that other people are looking at it all the time, and staring at it, and then you find one eye begins to cross down and then you're looking at it. You become cross-eyed at your own wart.

"You have to take that into account when you're writing with this kind of light on you," Kesey continues after some deliberation. "It's different than if you're writing as a stranger. When I was doing *Sometimes A Great Notion*, my personality was in it, but my personality was not something that anybody knew."

It is Indian Summer in Oregon as Kesey and I have this conversation, and *Sailor Song*, the author's first novel in twenty-eight years, has just been published by Viking. In writing it, he has chosen to include his sea lion tale for kids as an important part of its story line. This gives us the opportunity to discuss his feelings about the form, beginning with why get involved with children's books at all.

"I'm real certain of my kids' books," he says. "I've read them and performed them enough to know that this is a working piece of stuff. You're not telling stories that are meant to explore the psychological depths of a character, you're just trying to tell a story, like Poe or Zane Gray... and that's just so much more interesting to me. It's hard to be certain of a novel. They're so vast. But with a kids' story, the kids you're reading to, they don't know you from Ralph Waldo Emerson (laughs). They've never heard of Tom Wolfe, they've barely heard of the Grateful Dead (in whom's legacy Kesey is also inextricably linked), so if the story can't stand up on its own, no amount of posturing or critic's praise is going to change it in a kid's mind."

Surprisingly, given *The Sea Lion*'s prominence in his latest book, Kesey says he actually prefers *Tricker The Squirrel*, the story of a wily rodent who outwits the bears of a mythical forest called Topple's Bottom. "It's a better story," he explains. "It's a story that my grandmother told me and that I haven't changed except, as my grandma said when she heard me read it one time, 'I gussied it up quite a bit.' But the story itself has all the classical storytelling tricks in it: repeating things three times, using a lot of alliterative, using a lot of changes in tempo, large things against small things — every time I read it, I'll be surprised by another nuance I'll discover."

"Did you ever see *Beauty And The Beast*?" Kesey asks. "Super movie, isn't it? People will be watching that movie in a hundred years; they won't be watching *Silence Of The Lambs*. And the reason is, the story is so good you can just barely do anything to hurt it."

He is, to put it mildly, a pure distillation of the child within the man. This is never more evident than when he's performing his stories for children. Last October, for example, he ventured to West Harlem to read *The Sea Lion* to an audience of kids bused in by local church groups and homeless centers. In full costume, Kesey the actor-cum-shaman used magic tricks, slides, and audience participation to flesh out a show in which he played all the parts. This theatricality, he says, is the shape of literature — particularly children's literature — to come.

"Writing really doesn't happen until it connects with the mind of the reader or... I think we're getting into a time in which we can call the reader the viewer. If we don't confront the reader as viewer, we're going to lose a lot (of them).

"Gus Van Zandt, the (director of) *Drugstore Cowboy*, was here last week with his film crew to shoot me while I performed *The Sea Lion*, and to me, that is the real publication of it, more than the book. The book will be there and one thing doesn't preclude the other, but a performance is so much better and so much more fun for the artist as well as the viewer. You (begin a) novel, and you can just cross yourself off for about two years of being worth living with (laughs). It's corrosive work — and not just on you, but on everyone around you. You find yourself in the morning kicking the dog, throwing things at the cat, screaming at the parrot (laughs)."

Eventually, I get around to the question of how the public that embraces books has changed since Kesey first began writing his in the early 60's.

"Um, well, television has changed everything so enormously that it will never be the same, and for us in the writing world to bemoan the fact... that's like complaining about the last hurricane to hit Florida. There's nothing you can do about it but try and live after it. You have to compete with Big Bird and you have to compete with Cosby, you have to compete with all of the car chases and the gun shootings and low cleavages that are just there constantly in front of viewer's minds. And if you try to do it with all of the old stuff that used to catch attention, you'll find yourself left in the cold. If Shakespeare were working today, he would be trying to work in what is the most popular and exciting and juicy form, which would be like, MTV. Because whether you're a writer or a dancer or a filmmaker, the greatest sin that you can commit is boredom. My Dad told me a thing once that I've always remembered: good writing ain't necessarily good reading. He always emphasized to be sure that what you're writing is something that people will enjoy reading.

"It's difficult to do this," he continues, "especially when you're distracted by potential reviewers. Right now, everybody's talking about this (unfavorable) review (of *Sailor Song*) in The New York Times — they've talked about it enough that I was able to forestall myself and not read it (laughs). In fact I've quit reading all that stuff. I've decided that good reviews, they don't really help you, they just pump you up; and bad reviews, all they do is hurt you. My editor said, 'Well, you know it's a good book. You don't have to be effected by a bad review.' And I said, 'That's like saying, "Rodney King knew he was innocent." It doesn't make a difference when they're hitting you with a stick, it still hurts.'"

Soon Kesey will begin work on the further adventures of Tricker The Squirrel, to be followed by a children's book wherein a female character named Shula descends into the spirit world. "I'd like to see what happens when Shula meets Buddah," he says. He doesn't express a single regret about living outside the literary establishment.

"No. Not at all. I've watched a lot of writer friends do this and that, and one of the things you learn is that sometimes you have to make a choice between your family and your writing. It's very difficult to continue to write and maintain a marriage and a family because it seems to demand that you go back and live on the east coast, do lunch, and have certain acquaintances — and I never cared about those things. So I don't feel like I've missed anything by living out here. And what I've gained is immeasurable."